

# **Developmental History of Bahá'í Essentials**

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## **PREFACE**

I have written this short history on the development of the Bahá'í Essentials study guides to help their users better understand their complex design and how uniquely fitting they are to group study of the Bahá'í spiritual teachings. This study process has significant aspects I think people would like to know more about. My intention is to identify, explain, and share those features so they don't get lost with time.

## **BACKGROUND**

My wife, Sue, and I became Bahá'ís in 1973. We lived near Tygh Valley, a small rural town in north-central Oregon. We were both looking for a spiritual path because our short lives had already taught us something important. If we were going to have meaningful lives and be happy human beings, we needed to develop our spirituality. We read an advertisement in a local newspaper containing the phrase: “feel free to independently investigate the Bahá'í Faith.” It displayed a place and time for a fireside, which we eagerly attended. We continued to go to weekly firesides which also had a deepening element to them. Within a few months, we both declared our belief in Bahá'u'lláh. The people who taught us the Faith were a couple who had recently returned to the United States from a pioneering post in Italy. Their names were Mark and Barbara Hopkins (now Barbara Rosencranz). They informed us that teaching the Faith to others was vitally important because this Faith was for the whole world and the people were in great need of it and hungry for it. We were young and willing, so we began to teach the Faith in our local area. In just over a year we were able to form a local spiritual assembly comprised of all new believers. Consequently, we

were visited regularly by seasoned Bahá'ís who helped deepen us in the teachings of the Faith and in the proper functioning of a Bahá'í community with a local spiritual assembly.

We were a very fortunate community to have such well deepened and willing Bahá'ís come to our locality and deepen us in the fundamental verities of the Faith and train us in Bahá'í service. Two of these selfless souls, Katherine Young and Ruth Hall, would travel three hours each way to visit our small rural community. As new Bahá'ís, we were all naive to the rarity of our situation. In the early 1970s we didn't know how unusual it was to have enough new believers to form an assembly in such a short time, especially in a rural area of Eastern Oregon. At the time there were approximately 22 local spiritual assemblies in Oregon. All but two, ours being one of them, were in the more populated western side of the state.

In 1975 Hand of the Cause of God Dr. Rahmatu'lláh Muhájir was traveling in the United States recruiting international and home-front pioneers to help establish the Faith in other countries and in nearby localities. Sue and I attended one of those meetings. I remember the room being full of Bahá'ís who were excited about hearing a Hand of the Cause speak. At the end of the meeting, Dr. Muhájir asked people to come forward to volunteer as pioneers to other countries. To my surprise, nearly 30 people arose and went forward. Because we were parents of two toddlers, we felt unable to pioneer, so we remained seated. However, a call also was raised for home-front pioneers. After returning home we consulted with our community and with the couple who had pioneered to Italy. We decided we would home-front pioneer to Ontario, a small town in Oregon approximately 300 miles away from where we were living. We were already home-front pioneers in Tygh Valley, which felt good, but by moving we both could attend college and hopefully acquire professions that would allow us to pioneer to another country later.

Several months after we arrived at our home-front pioneering post, we received a request from the Oregon District Teaching Committee to work with a team of Bahá'í teachers who could be sent to our area to teach the Faith. We were eager for such a teaching event. A teaching team consisting of approximately 15 people came and spent two weeks with us that summer. Every day they would get up early to pray and deepen together. They would then go out in pairs to teach the Faith. They would go door to door or visit local parks or any other places where they were likely to run into people and strike up a conversation. They would talk with people about the Faith, invite them to

attend firesides and local public talks, and sometimes invite them to be Bahá'ís. By the end of the two-week teaching event, we had 27 new believers in our area!

There we were with 27 new believers and only the two of us available to deepen them, and we had only been Bahá'ís for three years. What to do? We made every effort to contact all the new believers and invite them to attend our local gatherings, which usually consisted of a short talk on some Bahá'í subject followed by a deeper exploration of the Bahá'í writings. That's what we knew, so that's what we did. Less than a handful showed interest in being contacted, and even fewer felt comfortable attending any activities. We decided, in consultation with the District Teaching Committee, to provide some kind of deepening classes for the new believers. Because most of them were uncomfortable attending meetings or events, we thought it best to offer home visits. We promised to spend no more than an hour talking with them about their newly adopted Faith. A few responded to our offer.

Then came the question: How do we deepen these people? The believers who had deepened us were seasoned Bahá'ís. They had read most of the Bahá'í books available at the time, had attended various deepenings, summer and winter schools, workshops, and conferences over the years and many had compiled their own notes for study classes. We had started doing the same ourselves over the last three years but didn't have much to go on yet. While there were numerous pamphlets, books, and compilations available to help new believers become more familiar with the teachings of the Faith, at that time there were no national or international deepening programs available specifically for new believers. We were unsure how to proceed.

At that time when a person became a Bahá'í in the United States they received what was called a "New Believer's Packet." It consisted of a few small pamphlets and single-page, colored handouts detailing various aspects of the Faith. Topics included the Station of Bahá'u'lláh, the Station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Administrative Order, and the importance of the Nineteen Day Feast, among others. The handouts featured a title at the top of the page followed by a series of questions on a topic that were answered with quotations from the Central Figures of the Faith, the Guardian, and the Universal House of Justice. Reading the questions and clearly understanding the related quotations was difficult enough for a seasoned believer, let alone brand new Bahá'ís! Nevertheless, we decided to use the "New Believer's Packet" material to deepen these new believers.

We would visit these new believers, pray with them, talk with them about the Faith, answer their questions, and deepened with them by reading the questions and answers provided in the new believer's handouts. Many of the Bahá'í quotations were from Shoghi Effendi, so you can imagine how difficult it was for new believers to understand what was being read to them. We would read a quote and then try to explain its meaning. Then we read the next question and its answering quotation and explained again. It was challenging for new believers. I remember people falling asleep as I was talking. I was trying to give them too much complicated information too quickly. Also, the whole process was unidirectional with me doing most of the reading and talking while they listened and asked occasional questions. I didn't know any other way to help new believers understand the basic truths or fundamental verities of the Faith they had just joined, other than offering various pamphlets and books. We considered using the Comprehensive Deepening Program published by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (NSA) that was available at the time, but it was not specifically designed for new believers. Sue and I became seriously concerned about our ability to meet the new believers' needs. We began to investigate other methods of deepening, including an exploration of how other religions taught their faiths. We also consulted with Bahá'ís wherever we went to find out if someone had found a better way.

We had been extremely fortunate in being taught and deepened in the Faith by knowledgeable and dedicated individuals. We did not appreciate at the time how special our new-believer experience had been. Although our involvement with the teaching teams had been providential in teaching us how to teach, we felt alone and responsible for building a community of 27 new believers without an effective method of deepening. We were sincerely concerned, and we were frustrated. It wasn't that the Bahá'í writings were insufficient. It wasn't that we weren't praying or weren't dedicated enough. We were struggling because we had no educational process to deepen new adult believers sufficiently in the basic teachings of the Faith. We didn't know how to help them understand the Faith adequately or how to engage them enough to retain their interest. It was very trying. Back then we were unable to appreciate how those difficulties were necessary for our growth or how they inspired our search for better ways to deepen. Today we are thankful to Bahá'u'lláh for those difficulties and for the inspiration He provided!

## **EXPERIENCES AND DISCOVERIES**

Oregon had approximately 22 local spiritual assemblies in 1974. After the direct teaching efforts from 1975 through 1978, we ended up with sixty-some assemblies in the state. How to deepen all the new believers became the vital question for many of us, propelling me on a life-long search for a method of deepening that was meaningful, successful, and repeatable. I remember hearing Ruhyyih Khanum speak at an international youth conference in Hawaii in 1974. Speaking with emphasis, she said: “Don’t ask yourself what you can do for the Cause, but ask yourself, ‘What does the Cause need?’ And then just do it!” This was not to be the only time I heard her say those words, and they stuck! I began collecting folders (this was before computers) full of quotations and references for deepening on basic Bahá’í subjects.

In 1977 I had a work-study job at the college I was attending. I worked for a year as an assistant to a psychology professor. During my first day on the job, the professor brought me a stack of textbooks two-feet high and dropped them on my desk. He informed me that over the next nine months he wanted me to read these textbooks cover to cover and copy for him any material I thought was new or added information to the lectures he was giving. I dutifully read those college textbooks on psychology, which was my major at the time. What became particularly interesting to me was how people learn, how people remember, and how people change their thinking and behavior. As I was a Bahá’í, I always tried to integrate this new information with the Bahá’í teachings as I understood them. The knowledge I acquired during this experience later helped me develop the study process used in Bahá’í Essentials. One specific example is that memory enhancement, conceptual expansion, and significant behavioral change require an emotional component or experience to “seal it” in the mind and make it more permanent. My experience over the years has borne this out. Any good learning or training exercise can be markedly improved by structuring a strong emotional experience into the process. I would not forget this axiom.

In the early 1970s, the NSA commissioned the development of the Bahá’í Comprehensive Deepening Program, which consisted of deepening material based on a definition of deepening given by the Universal House of Justice in its 1967 Ridván message. Individuals and groups used the material in various ways, but there were no specific directions on how to use it other than to come together to read and discuss the material.

In 1977, the NSA's National Education Committee initiated the Personal Transformation Program, which utilized the Comprehensive Deepening Program material over a ten-week course of study. It contained a specific study format to help believers consider a new approach—or at least an organized, repeatable, and more meaningful approach—to deepening their understanding of the sacred writings. It taught us to consider the numerous ways we could apply the Bahá'í teachings and how to make personal goals to manifest the teachings in our beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors. We were first taught to read through a verse and then identify key ideas, concepts, or statements in the verse that “I liked.” The next step was to collectively brainstorm ways to put the teachings into action with a statement beginning with “One could.” Following that, we developed a clear intention by personally selecting a means to apply the teachings by writing out how “I will...” apply this in my personal life. The program also contained homework that included a self-analysis approach to evaluating goals and successes. It was a good program, but it was limited to the material that had been developed at the time, and it was totally dependent on specially trained facilitators. However, we did learn a useful and repeatable way to study and understand the sacred writings and how to convert them into action: (1) identify key words or phrases in a selected reading, (2) consider the numerous ways the teaching could be applied in one's life, and (3) make a commitment to action. What a simple yet profound advancement in the development of adult study of sacred Scriptures! Bahá'u'lláh reminds us, *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.”*<sup>1</sup> Here was a practical and effective method to do just that! Sue and I went through this program in 1979 and I became trained as a facilitator. An approach to deepening new believers was developing in my mind, but it was far from being complete.

In the early 1980s, I had an insightful experience at a Bahá'í training in Bend, Oregon. It was a training on how to teach the Bahá'í Faith to Christians, presented by Guy Hamblen. Guy was teaching Bahá'ís a unique method of understanding biblical symbology by replacing certain words or phrases in the Bible with those that expressed their true meaning as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. One example was a verse in the Bible about the return of Jesus “coming in the clouds.” We would replace the words “clouds” with the description of “clouds” given by Bahá'u'lláh: *“By the term*

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<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Fountain of Wisdom*, p. 153 ¶11.9

*'clouds' is meant those things that are contrary to the ways and desires of men.*"<sup>2</sup>. The verse from Mark 13:26 in the King James Version of the Bible about the return of Christ reads like this: *"And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory."* By replacing *"in the clouds"* with *"those things that are contrary to the ways and desires of men,"* we could read the Biblical verse this way: *"And then shall they see the Son of man coming with **those things that are contrary to the ways and desires of men** with power and great glory."* Suddenly, the verse comes out of the realm of obscurity into one of clarity, from a seeming impossibility to one of understanding, from a potentially superstitious interpretation to one of truth. What a great way to explore sacred Scripture! What a significant gift this was to our understanding. How well it simplified and clarified difficult and often confrontational issues and subjects. From that point on it became my habit to refer to other explanations or interpretations found elsewhere in the Bahá'í sacred writing and to read those definitions or explanations into the texts I was studying for better understanding. I began using this method in various deepening presentations. People liked it.

From 1987 through 1993, the National Teaching Committee prepared a study program consisting of a five-part series on the major themes of the creative word. The lengthy study process included the reading of a written introduction to the lesson, the reading of a written overview and explanation of each particular study with quotes and examples, followed by a reading and discussion of numerous quotations from the sacred writings. It continued with the reading of an illustration or story, three ways to explore the lesson topic in more depth, a list of questions to be answered by the participants, a collective review of the answers, and a list of questions for group discussion. It sometimes ended with an additional exercise exploring the topic in more depth with suggested answers to the exercise. A list of additional materials on the subject also was provided. Whew! It was a long, tedious, complex study process, but meaningful. What was new and useful to me in this study process was that in the margins on each page, beside the quotations from the sacred writings, were definitions of some of the words found in the quotations. The definitions were a significant aid in understanding the sacred verses. I started to incorporate this provision as well into some of the studies we were offering at the time.

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<sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 71

In 1989, the NSA charged its National Bahá'í Educational Committee with a special task of creating a core curriculum for the spiritual education of children aged 6–12. I went through the Core Curriculum training for teachers in the early 1990s. Some of the outstanding features of the training included a review of human development and evidence-based materials on the different ways children learn at specific ages, which is different still from how adults learn.

I continued to feel there was something incomplete about the way we were deepening in the Bahá'í community. Generally, we were still reading a collection of sacred verses and then discussing what it meant. Often the discussion would be led by a seasoned believer who had extensive knowledge of the writings. When questions arose they were usually the ones answering. If a younger or newer believer understood something different than what was presented, it wasn't uncommon for a veteran believer to override their perspective by quoting a verse from memory they thought settled the difference. What this was doing, however, was quelling the enthusiasm of younger believers, newer believers, and sometimes the more reserved believers from engaging in an exploration of the meaning of the sacred texts because their opinions or perspectives didn't always feel welcome. What to do?

In the early 1980s, Sue and I developed a teaching course we called the TEC Program, which stood for Teaching, Enrollment, and Consolidation. We were invited to California to give a two-day seminar. We stayed with our friends Steve and Jackie Pennington, two certified hypnotherapists at the time who had undergone training in Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP). We had quite a discussion about the ethics of the program. We eventually came to a collective conclusion that NLP did provide good scientific research on the value of speaking in ways that helped people communicate with specificity and clarity. How could this not be a good thing if used properly? Neurolinguistic Programming simply helps one person communicate with another by identifying their primary mode of processing information (usually either visual, auditory, or kinesthetic) and then tailoring one's speech to match the listener's preferred modality. We began to use this knowledge and noticed we were able to communicate in ways that significantly expanded understanding. This skill fostered greater unity in our relationships and community life. After gaining some additional experience, we were able to incorporate the communication skills from the NLP material into the language and processes of the studies we were developing.



One day in the mid-1980s I was listening to an evening news broadcast from another room. I heard an outbreak of yelling coming from a heated conversation between two people, which was unusual in those days. I quickly looked around the corner to see what was going on. The news anchor said, “Stay tuned, and we’ll learn from the newest scientific studies how to communicate better with your spouse.” I watched the segment. It described the value of clear communication in enhancing interpersonal relationships and how it was significantly reducing the divorce rate among those who were undergoing the communication training. Communication—isn’t that what deepening is? God communicates his spirit through his Manifestations, who then communicate it to the people through the Word that becomes sacred text. Wasn’t it our task, in some way, to develop a deepening program to enhance that communication? I wanted to know more. The next day I called ABC News in New York to inquire about the information I had seen on the program. I was referred to the University of Denver psychology department where the studies were being conducted. I contacted them immediately. They invited me to attend an upcoming seminar to learn the skills. I was a practicing Chiropractic Physician at the time and the only non-psychotherapist invited. I attended and recorded the entire seminar. It was excellent. Their research discoveries were so valuable I decided to restructure their two-hour weekly workshop series into a two-day training and started teaching their communication skills to couples. I liked everything about it; however, it did seem like something was still missing in the process of communication I was unable to identify. I didn’t know what it was until 2005 when I was introduced to Marshall Rosenberg’s program for Nonviolent Communication. I attended his seminar and bought the videotapes. What had been missing was an understanding of human barriers and a specific knowledge and skill to bridge them.

I am telling you these stories because they all led to, and became part of, the development of the study process in Bahá’í Essentials. During the latter half of the twentieth century, corporate America was at its peak. Corporations were focused on profit, and they were acutely aware that developing adept human resources was key to their success. Billions of dollars were spent on research and development, resulting in highly efficient techniques and programs for educating and training adults. Their discoveries were leaking into the public domain and were being widely disseminated. Concurrently, there was an explosion of interest in studying, testing, reporting, and sharing methods of self-help education in the form of books, tapes, videos, seminars, trainings, and retreats. A great deal of discovery took place during this time. We were hungry for knowledge, which prompted us to read, listen to, study, and attend anything and everything we thought could

be helpful in our personal lives or our Bahá'í service. We took advantage of this explosion of material. We would carefully review new information, extract what was consistent with Bahá'í spiritual principles, and then utilize whatever we could.

While attending a Bahá'í teaching conference near Seattle, Washington in the late 1980s, we set up a booth to share the TEC Program we were providing at the time. During the break, the attendees could visit the booths at their leisure. I remember standing in the lane in front of our display table. I saw a well-dressed woman step into the lane and glance to her left and right as if to scan the booths. Her eyes locked on me. She turned and marched straight at me, reached out her hand to shake mine, and asked, "Who are you, and what do you have going on here?" She listened intently as I told her about the TEC Program. We continued our conversation over lunch. Her name was Bev Hovley. She told me she liked what we were doing and thought she had something to offer. Our home was an eight-hour drive from Bellevue, Washington, where Bev lived, yet she volunteered to come to our home and participate in the TEC Program that was still in development. Bev was a professional strategic planning trainer and facilitator. She worked with several big-name, multinational companies, helping them develop company vision statements, goals, objectives, and lines of action. She was an expert in adult learning and proficient in teaching adults new concepts and in training them to apply new skills. She referred me to several books containing current studies in adult learning, which is quite different from childhood learning, thus requiring different methods for teaching and training. From her kind and loving guidance, and from the books she recommended, I continued to learn more effective, efficient, and successfully proven methods to enhance adult learning experiences.

Bev's facilitating style gave greater emphasis to how people *received* the lessons and less importance on how we thought it *should be* presented. In addition to teaching us how groups work, she taught us how to make sure *everyone* had a meaningful experience while learning what was intended. An especially useful skill she taught was how to reverse engineer learning experiences so they could be repeated or duplicated. She also explained how to prevent excessive talking and how to equalize the various powers in a group so there was true equality in the experience. All these things were vital to structuring an efficient and unifying deepening program that would be meaningful to a diverse Bahá'í community.

Another powerful skill I learned for enhancing communication in a group setting was the use of a “talking stick.” This tool, derived from the Native American “talking circle”, is so simple, yet it provides a powerful way for equalizing power within a group. It works like this: someone is handed a stick, or sometimes a feather, to hold while stating their perspective on the subject at hand. When they are talking, no cross-talk or questions are allowed. This focuses everyone on listening rather than on thinking about what to say next. It is not a conversation. One person speaks at a time. When they are finished talking, they hand the talking stick to the next person in the circle. No one speaks directly to or about another. Each opinion is offered humbly to the group. This process subtly equalizes everyone’s opinions. Those who tend to dominate conversation or consultation are now put on equal footing with everyone else. Those who are often sensitive for various reasons can feel safe enough to add their perspective to the consultation without feeling judged, overridden, or intimidated in any way. Their power becomes equal to that of everyone else. Isn’t this one of the goals of good consultation? Isn’t this a vital factor in a good deepening program, especially for new believers? I think so. Many professionals who worked in the development of communication skills for self-help groups had adopted the “talking circle” for their purposes as well. In the communication seminars we were developing, we used a piece of flooring tile instead of a stick or feather. Whoever held the piece of flooring literally “had the floor.”

When we were developing the TEC Program, we were dismayed that it seemed to take until late into the second day of the two-day seminar for a feeling of unity to become strong in the group. I can remember when I was on the Eastern Oregon Schools Committee discussing how it took nearly three days for a strong sense of unity to be felt among the participants at the winter and summer schools that had 50 to 100 attendees. My conversations with others revealed this was not uncommon. We were all coming to these schools from varied backgrounds, from smaller or larger communities, some with families and some not, some married and some not, some long-time Bahá’ís and some new believers. It was natural and normal for it to take a while for worldly defenses and suspicions to be melted away by the love that permeates such events. The question became: “How do we, *can we*, create an experience that will facilitate the feeling and spirit of unity earlier in the two-day TEC seminars we were providing?” We were on the search.

What we had witnessed, and the psychology of learning bears this out, was: if people in a group can have a guided, mutual, emotional experience and then share their individual feelings about that

experience in the “talking circle format,” unity can be quickly consolidated. What I mean by unity is a heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony within a group, free of feelings of judgment, competition, or contention. We also knew from studies in psychology that learning is more permanently imprinted in memory and behavior when the learning event evokes strong emotions during the experience. We concluded that the participants had to have a strong emotional experience compounded with a learning event if we were going to secure unity early in the seminar. How were we going to do that?

We decided on the first morning of our two-day seminar to view a 20-minute segment of Adib Taherzadeh’s video titled, “In His Presence.” It was the strongest emotional Bahá’í experience we could think of that was reproducible in a short period of time. We selected a portion where Adib Taherzadeh told stories of early believers being in the presence of Bahá’u’lláh. The group would watch the video and then quietly write down their answers to this question: “What was the strongest emotional experience you can recall having when you felt close to God or Bahá’u’lláh?” This question, unknown to us beforehand, accessed some aspect of the spiritual rebirth experience we have all had in some way. After writing their answers, everyone was asked to circle the chairs, to leave their notes on their chairs, and to take a short break by leaving the room. We then set a mood with candles, rose petals from the Shrine of the Báb, and soft music to activate all the senses. When the participants returned, we anointed them with rose water, asked them to be seated quietly, and then initiated a talking circle with a talking stick. People were asked to share their personal stories one at a time and explain how it made them feel. When people feel safe with a group, which the talking stick format helps to create, they become willing to share deep, heartfelt emotions and experiences. We discovered that when others listen to the stories they are touched with such empathy for the speaker that all feelings of negation dissolve as the feelings of love and unity permeate the group. We found everyone had equally important and meaningful events and feelings to share, causing all those present to experience a natural feeling of unity. This sealed the learning experience and met our objective to significantly enhance the feelings of unity by noon of the first day of the seminar.

The next question was: How do we transfer this discovery into a deepening program?

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY PROCESS**

The Universal House of Justice wrote in its 1996 Ridván letter to the Bahá'ís of the World, "Training institutes and other centres of learning are an indispensable element of a sustained endeavour to advance this process [the process of entry by troops], and to ensure that the essential deepening of new believers is not neglected, that they develop the necessary skills to effectively teach the Faith, and that an opportunity is provided for all Bahá'ís, new and veteran, to embark on a systematic study of the fundamental verities of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. We look to your communities to make an energetic response to the call for such institutes, and to develop a wide variety of approaches fitted to the needs of the diverse components of your population." The Universal House of Justice in its 1996 Ridván letter to North America further added, "To effect the possibilities of expansion and consolidation implied by entry by troops, a determined, worldwide effort to develop human resources must be made. The endeavour of individuals to conduct study classes in their homes, the sponsorship by the institutions of occasional courses of instruction, and the informal activities of the community, though important, are not adequate for the education and training of a rapidly expanding community. It is therefore of paramount importance that systematic attention be given to devising methods for educating large numbers of believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith and for training and assisting them to serve the Cause as their God-given talents allow. There should be no delay in establishing permanent institutes designed to provide well-organized, formally conducted programmes of training on a regular schedule."

After our family had moved to Alaska, I was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Alaska. I shared with the National Assembly members the deepening program I had been working on to meet the Universal House of Justice's requirement to "devise methods for educating large numbers of believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith." I was assigned that task by the National Assembly and also was asked to oversee the development of trainings that would assist the believers to "serve the Cause as their God-given talents allow." Our mission just acquired a new level of seriousness.

We immediately started a regular deepening program in Anchorage on the fundamental verities of the Faith. We named the study "Deep Soup" because one of the believers volunteered to host an

evening meal of soup for everyone if I would facilitate the deepening. This began our pilot studies of the fundamental verities, employing everything we had learned up until then about teaching adults.

An issue that became immediately evident was the need for a more complete list of the “fundamental verities.” Was there one? What were they exactly? Everyone I spoke with had a different opinion. The search began. I went first to Shoghi Effendi. Did he make a list? Well, yes and no. He made several lists in which he designated fundamental verities but no one, complete list. I began collecting all the references I could find on the fundamental verities of the Faith. Because there was no complete list and everyone had a different idea what that list of subjects should be, I decided to include only those fundamental verities designated or strongly implied as such by Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice.

I continued to pay attention in my regular reading of the Bahá’í writings to any subject that might be considered a fundamental verity that could be added to Bahá’í Essentials. I may have missed some, but for now, there are 33 studies. The fundamental verities I restricted my focus on are those basic truths of the Faith that will go unchanged throughout this dispensation. I have avoided those teachings considered “social teachings” by some as they will lend themselves to a different series of studies that most likely will require a different study process. (see “Fountain of Light” [here](#)) Bahá’í Essentials focuses on the subjects of study identified by the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice as important for believers to deepen in and to become thoroughly familiar with. The primary references I used to develop a list of the fundamental verities can be found under “References for Subjects of Study” found [here](#).

To develop a study for Bahá’í Essentials, I first would identify a subject from the list of fundamental verities and then clearly describe the objectives, which usually came directly from the words of the Guardian or the Universal House of Justice. Afterward, I would engage in thorough research of the subject under consideration. This would usually take several weeks. During the process of making an effort to thoroughly understand the subject myself, I would collect all relevant quotations and references in a file on my computer. In those days I had a Toshiba black and white screen laptop—and no internet. I had a Bahá’í search program called MARS that was developed by Lee Nelson. I used it to search words, phrases, and topics related to the subject of

study. Fortunately for me, the Universal House of Justice had commissioned the research and printing of numerous compilations on various subjects. Many of the “subjects of study” I finally listed as fundamental verities of the Cause had already been collected in these compilations.

After collecting as many quotations and references as I could find on one of the study subjects, I would set about to identify those quotations that most clearly and thoroughly described the truths or fundamental verities of the subject. Selecting quotations for the study was the most difficult part. Every quotation had to meet the objective(s) that had been identified or they would be discounted as irrelevant to the purpose. We had learned this imperative from our beloved Bev Hovley, and we became persistent at reminding each other of its importance. This was challenging for me because as I reviewed the subject in the Bahá’í writings I would discover countless outstanding quotations I felt *must* be included. Staying true to the objective(s) was imperative, though. The list of quotations had to be reduced to only those that clearly presented the basic truths of the subject. This required eliminating duplications already stated in another quotation and those that didn’t clarify or enhance the understanding of the subject as it related to the objectives. Another important criterion was to avoid selecting too many quotations to emphasize a point, which can make a study feel burdensome rather than inspiring. Additionally, we had to limit the number of quotations to keep the study to a two-hour maximum. Time and time again we found a two-hour event or study for adults is about the limit for retaining meaningful attention and focus.

After quotations for the study were identified, they had to be arranged in an order that we thought best unfolded the subject, made it easier to learn, and was most understandable. We learned that the order of the quotations was far more important than we had originally thought. When we would test our study with a group, we would sometimes find the participants confused and uncertain about the importance of a quotation until a later point in the study. Creating an order for the quotations that best avoided confusion and developed the subject in a meaningful, understandable way became challenging, but it was important enough for us to give it serious attention.

Another imperative we imposed on our work was the importance of studying quotations that were from authenticated Bahá’í writings. All the quotations we chose for each particular subject were from either the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, or the Universal House of Justice. We chose those references because the words of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh are *“the Divine Elixir,*

*which, swift as the twinkling of an eye, transmutes the souls of men!*”<sup>3</sup> We included the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi because in the twin covenants of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá they were appointed with the authority to interpret the divine text of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. And, we included statements from the Universal House of Justice because that body is entitled with the right to elucidate on the Bahá’í teachings.

Reading Bahá’í quotations and thoroughly understanding some of the English vocabulary can be difficult for even the most educated among us. A believer was advised by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to “study the Holy Scriptures word by word so that you may attain knowledge of the mysteries hidden therein. Be not satisfied with words, but seek to understand the spiritual meanings hidden in the heart of the words.”<sup>4</sup> Before one can derive the hidden meaning in the heart of the words, a clear understanding of the definition of the words is undeniably important. Bahá’u’lláh tells us that “*the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise reading, without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man.*”<sup>5</sup> Another worthy reminder is the following quotation from Bahá’u’lláh: “*The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.*”<sup>6</sup>

Bear in mind the words and phrases used by the Guardian in his writings and his translations of the sacred writings into English were done during the early decades of the twentieth century. The English language has changed considerably since that time. Many of the words and phrases used by the Guardian are rarely found in modern language or literature. It was also known that Shoghi Effendi emulated the English style of writing demonstrated by Edward Gibbon in his classic, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which was an even older version of English! He learned this style because while at Oxford he was told Edward Gibbon was the true master of the English language. He knew in the future he would be translating the Bahá’í writings into English, and he wanted to provide its best possible expression.

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<sup>3</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 156

<sup>4</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 459

<sup>5</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 172

<sup>6</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 210



Ruhiyyih Khanum, Shoghi Efendi's wife, wrote the following about him: "From his Beirut days until practically the end of his life Shoghi Effendi had the habit of writing vocabularies and typical English phrases in notebooks. Hundreds of words and sentences have been recorded and these clearly indicate the years of careful study he put into mastering a language he loved and revelled in. For him there was no second to English. He was a great reader of King James version of the Bible, and of the historians Carlyle and Gibbon, whose style he greatly admired, particularly that of Gibbon whose *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Shoghi Effendi was so fond of that I never remember his not having a volume of it near him in his small room and usually with him when he travelled. There was a small *Everyman's* copy of part of it next to his bed when he died. It was his own pet bible of the English language and often he would read to me excerpts from it, interrupting himself with exclamations such as 'Oh what style; what a command of English; what rolling sentences; listen to this.' With his beautiful voice and pronunciation—in the direction of what we call an 'Oxford accent,' but not exaggeratedly so—the words fairly glowed with colour and their value and meaning came out like shining jewels. I particularly remember one peaceful hour (so rare, alas) when we sat on a bench facing the lake on a summer afternoon in St James' Park in London and he read me Gibbon out loud. He revelled in him and throughout Shoghi Effendi's writings the influence of his style may clearly be seen, just as the biblical English is reflected in his translations of Bahá'u'lláh's Prayers, The Hidden Words and Tablets."<sup>7</sup>

I was remembering the series of studies published by the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly from 1987 through 1993 that had definitions of the more difficult or meaningful words in the margins for the convenience of the participants. And I remembered the technique we learned from the study on how to teach the Faith to Christians where we would use a definition or interpretation from the Bahá'í writings to replace a word or phrase in the Bible to better understand the verse. Consequently, I decided to provide definitions of words, or sometimes synonyms of a word, or sometimes a simple phrase, to temporarily replace difficult or complex words or phrases in the quotations being studied. This allowed participants the opportunity to look up a word and read it into a sentence from a Bahá'í quotation for better clarity about what had been written, not for any

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<sup>7</sup> Ruhiyyih Khanum, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 37

deeper spiritual insights or spiritual knowledge. Albeit, clarity and understanding of the written word can surely facilitate a more accurate and insightful spiritual perspective.

Before we provided definitions, synonyms, or replacement phrases, we tried having a dictionary present for the group to use as needed. That did not work at all! The participants spent too much time looking up words and often arguing over which definitions were pertinent to the word in the quotation. Providing the definitions, synonyms, or replacement phrases completely avoided this problem.

Another concern was: How am I going to provide an accurate definition of a word, or choose the right synonym, or create a sufficient replacement phrase? Would I be interpreting the sacred writings? No, not if I could stay true to the accurate English rendition of the word. Where was I going to find that? Which dictionary should I be using? I remembered the Guardian had attended Oxford College, so I assumed, with no clear proof (as I know I should never do) he must have used the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a guide in his translation. I remembered reading about Ruhyyih Khanum carrying around his big dictionary for him. I decided to investigate. The primary dictionary used at Oxford during the time the Guardian was attending college there was the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I was determined to find a copy. The search began.

I found out that the *Oxford English Dictionary* had 13 volumes that stretched over a distance of nearly four feet! Well, that couldn't be what Ruhyyih Khanum was packing around. I discovered the entire 13-volume dictionary was also published in a two-volume boxed set, entitled *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, which was printed in a four-point font and came with a magnifying glass in a little drawer of the boxed set. Okay. I was going to find one.

The dictionary I was looking for was in its second edition. To be consistent with the era of the Guardian, I needed a first edition, which was no longer available. I had to find a used set. Because this was before eBay, Amazon, and the internet, I had to visit some used bookstores. After stopping at several in Anchorage, I finally found the dictionary, a two-volume boxed set with a magnifying glass, for 50 dollars. I didn't have an extra 50 dollars at the time, so I thought I would wait until payday and then return and purchase the dictionary. A week went by. I had the 50 dollars, and it was my day off. "I'm going to get my dictionary today," I thought. I remember driving to the bookstore. I was in a hurry, as usual, when I came up behind a guy driving a slow-moving backhoe

and taking up most of the road. I wanted to get around him so I was pushing him. And then I remembered that this was my day off. I need not be in a hurry. I had all day! I backed off a little and followed the backhoe until I arrived at the bookstore. I walked in and went right over to the dictionary, which was still there. As I was about to reach up and pull it off the top shelf, I noticed another book with an interesting title just below the dictionary. I reached over and picked up the book to give it a perusal. Just then a man walked over and, standing behind me, said, “Excuse me, sir,” as he reached up over my right shoulder and took the two-volume boxed set *Oxford English Dictionary* off the shelf and walked it over to the cashier. I stood there in shock, staring at the book in my hand, but reading nothing. The man who had removed the dictionary then said to the cashier: “I have a friend who has been coveting one of these dictionaries but can’t afford one. I’m going to buy this one just to make him jealous.” I was paralyzed with disbelief. How was it possible that this dictionary I wanted and thought I needed had been snatched from me right before my face? What were the chances that these volumes, which probably had been on the shelf for months, were being bought on that particular day, at that specific time, when I was standing right in front of them and about to buy them myself? I was in shock! I left the bookstore and went home.

During the development of Bahá’í Essentials, I prayed specifically for divine assistance every time before I worked on one of the projects. I know beyond any doubt that divine assistance is required for the success of any meaningful project, and prayer is an absolute necessity. I had no doubt that this event was, at least in my little world, a miracle, and an answer to my prayers. If this had happened, then there was more to it than met the eye. I decided to write to the Bahá’í World Center to inquire about the actual dictionary used by the Guardian. I received this reply:

“Regarding the dictionary most often used by the Guardian, we have found a statement in a communication dated 23 June 1982, from the Universal House of Justice to a department at the Bahá’í World Centre, that Amatu’l-Baha Ruhyyih Khanum has advised:

‘...that the English dictionary to which the beloved Guardian habitually referred was “Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language,” second edition, unabridged, 1934, London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd., Springfield, Massachusetts, R. and C. Merriam Co. We presume that if there were two versions published, one American and one British, it will have been the British one that the Guardian used. Reference to this specific

edition of this dictionary is, obviously, very important when gauging the exact meaning intended by Shoghi Effendi in the use of certain words.”

Well, that answered that. Thank you, Lord, for the man in the bookstore. What did I learn? Pray and ask for guidance, then pay attention. The answer is coming, but probably not as expected. And, don't make assumptions! Verify everything.

It didn't take me long to find a copy of the right dictionary. Soon I was writing replacement phrases, definitions, and synonyms, but another issue arose. The definitions used in the Websters New International Dictionary of the English Language (WNIDEL), second edition, were often as difficult to understand as the primary words I was trying to redefine. What to do? I remembered working with a friend who had been in advertising for years. He told me most people in America read well at a sixth-grade level, and most advertising kept this in mind when structuring their language. I decided to acquire a Webster's elementary school dictionary based on the WNIDEL to assist my work. I ended up with several.

A short time after receiving the letter about the dictionary used by the Guardian, I was standing at a counter in a thrift store. On a shelf behind the counter was a two-volume set of *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, complete with a magnifying glass, for 35 dollars. I went straight behind the counter, glancing over my shoulder as I walked, removed the boxed set from the shelf, and purchased it—smiling. What I like about the Oxford Dictionary is it includes the historic development of words or phrases, which helps me understand them even better.

As I prepared replacement phrases, definitions, and synonyms for the studies in Bahá'í Essentials, I often referred to numerous dictionaries to find the most accurate rendition I could, while keeping it simple and as true to the WNIDEL definitions as possible. Furthermore, I spent considerable time cross-referencing words used in the Bahá'í writings with the same word or phrase used elsewhere in Bahá'í text to present the most precise rendition of the word or phrase and its use as I could muster. This, I felt, was a key element to accuracy.

We were making progress. The study subjects were chosen as described. The Bahá'í writings on the subjects were reviewed in detail. Quotations were chosen that best represented the study objectives and were arranged in an order that best unfolded the information on the subject.

Replacement phrases, definitions, and synonyms were prepared and placed in alphabetical order in boxes below each quotation for the reader's convenience.

Now what? How to study the selected verses! We tried simply reading a verse and then discussing it. That didn't work. There were too many different opinions and discussions unrelated to the objectives under consideration. We tried the study process used in the Comprehensive Deepening Program where each participant would identify a key phrase or idea from a quotation, brainstorm ways to apply the idea, and follow up with a commitment to action. That didn't work either. The discussion couldn't stay on track with the purpose and objectives of the study. We asked ourselves: What is the purpose of studying the quotations? The purpose was to acquire the basic facts or truths pertaining to the objective! For example, the study objective for *Teaching the Faith* was "to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding the importance and responsibility of teaching the Faith to others." So, the participants were instructed, "Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about the importance and responsibility of teaching the Faith to others." This method worked! It helped participants stay focused on the purpose of the deepening, and it made it considerably easier for facilitators. All the facilitator had to do was repeat the statement until the participants exhausted the possibilities.

Our early efforts at deepening new believers taught us that giving them facts on a specific subject or telling them answers to questions is not as effective or meaningful as letting them discover the truths for themselves. Enthusiasm is generated in the search for truth and in discovery, joy is evoked, even if the discovery is made by someone else in the group! The emotional conditions of enthusiasm and joy help imprint the spiritual truths in their minds and hearts. Asking what the fundamental verities are in a verse stimulates a collective search and discovery from which every one of the participants benefit. They become actively engaged in their learning and feel ownership of their collective discoveries.

There is a primal spiritual need in all human beings—the need to search out the truth in things and to discover new understandings. Like little children sent out to the playground for the first time, everyone scatters and explores the playground equipment. They look under the rocks at the bugs. They look at one another and begin to select new friends. Search and discovery—it's what we are made of!

I have had people express concerns that participants may not convey the fundamental verities correctly when asked to state each basic fact or truth in the quotation, which they are free to either repeat verbatim from the quotation or state in their own words. I have found if the facilitator keeps repeating the same statement—“Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about (the subject)”—the participants are smart enough to clearly understand what they are being asked to do and always do so with maturity. They rarely need any prompting. I strive to never correct their discoveries unless there is blatant misunderstanding, which we are encouraged to explore with extreme kindness and sensitivity.

The process for studying sacred verses was beginning to come together. I had received an early copy of the study process used by the Ruhi Institute and was fortunate enough to attend a training. I liked the idea of reading the verses out loud more than once. It helped the participants understand a verse considerably. We tried several different approaches for our study process and finally concluded that reading a verse out loud twice was noticeably helpful and sufficient. Listening to a verse read out loud while reading along engages the senses of seeing and hearing, which notably contributes to understanding the reading. Here again, we were able to incorporate the application of science in the enhancement of adult learning.

The study *process* was now working quite well, requiring only a little tweaking as we continued to use it in different settings and conditions, but the entire study *format* was still incomplete. Rather than me verbally introducing the subject every time, we decided to write a general introduction that was short, thorough, and inspiring, or at least hopeful, if possible. This would also be helpful to future facilitators so they wouldn't have to prepare an introduction themselves. As stated earlier, one of the objectives in developing these studies was to try to make them stand-alone studies that would require as little facilitator training as possible. This was always a factor in the work.

There was still something missing. What about the emotional component we knew was vital for remembering the information learned and critical to creating empathy and enhancing bonds of love and unity in the group? Just being together, studying together, and praying together does this in part, but it can be enhanced by structuring an exercise with this intent. We knew how to do it because we had done it before in the TEC Program when we viewed the video of Adib Taherzadeh telling stories of early believers who had the honor of being in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. We

decided to structure a sharing exercise after the study of each verse. It didn't work for numerous reasons. We would ask, "What was the one thing that was most outstanding or inspiring from the verse, and how did it make you feel?" We asked it this way because it helps put participants in touch with their heartfelt emotions generated by the creative word of God. And usually, it works. However, repeating this after each verse didn't work so well because not everyone is emotionally moved by every verse. Plus, it was taking up too much time to have a talking circle sharing of perspectives and emotions after each reading. We decided to try it as an exercise after studying *all* the verses. That worked as intended. Asking people to identify a favorite or key phrase that moved them, then having them share that verse in a talking circle format and tell how it made them feel and why, put them in touch with their emotions while sharing with the group. This is an exercise in vulnerability. Through the sharing of a personal, emotional response to the creative Word, significant empathy is evoked from others in the group as they listen. Consequently, bonds of love and unity are strengthened while the spiritual truths are better imprinted into their memory and heart.

Regarding the importance of spiritual feelings, we are reminded by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "The power of conscience is therefore needed, and spiritual sentiments [feelings] are required, that souls may feel compelled to evince a goodly character."<sup>8</sup> And again: "Draw nigh unto Him with a pure heart, cheerful face, gazing eye and a joyful spirit and plunge with thy whole being into the sea of the love of God and forget all else save Him, so that thou mayest be filled with such spiritual sentiments [feelings] from the kingdom of God, which will take the reins of desire from thy hands and move thee with the power of thy Lord, just as the wind moveth a mote in the open air as it willeth. At that time we will draw unto each other in spirit, a nearness which will be eternal, everlasting and endless."<sup>9</sup>

Now what? Was there a need for more? There are countless exercises in adult learning to consider. Many were worthy, but would they add anything significant? Would they cause us to exceed our time limit? These were the questions we had to resolve to make the study process feel complete. We eventually decided on three additional components: a short questions-and-answers exercise, an application exercise, and a closing reading.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Second Tablet to the Hague, 1 July 1920, cited in *Additional Tablets, Extracts and Talks*

<sup>9</sup> *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Vol. 1, p. 200

The questions-and-answers exercise, or “*Some Questions: a cup from the showers of confirmation*” in the Bahá’í Essentials studies, is really not a test in the formal sense. Tests are what a teacher gives a student to evaluate their progress while the student’s responsibility is to demonstrate proof of learning. I like to think of them as “provings” as well as tests—“*God caused not this turmoil but to test and prove His servants*”<sup>10</sup> Even the tests from God are not necessarily to convince God we know something or have attained something, but are an opportunity for us to step up and prove to ourselves that we are capable and worthy. So, this exercise has two very important functions. The first function is to give participants an opportunity to acquire assurance they have learned the basic truths pertaining to the subject matter. The second function of the testing (or proving) exercise is if a participant doesn’t recall an answer accurately, an immediate review of the correct answer after a question helps set in their hearts the true and proper fundamental verity being explored. Studies in learning have shown that when students undergo a test that is followed by an immediate review of the proper answers to the questions, learning is measurably improved.

If time is short, some facilitators will just read a question out loud and then provide the correct answer, which can be found at the end of each study. We suggest taking shortcuts here, if necessary, but not elsewhere during the study. Sometimes there is pertinent information on a subject that couldn’t be worked into the introduction or wasn’t part of the verses studied. In those cases, we would add supplemental information in the questions exercise. The additional information on the subject matter is there to help the participants obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental verities being studied..

I personally don’t like quizzes and tests because they can expose one’s mistaken understandings and errors to the group, which I think is inconsistent with the spirit of the Faith. I have tried instead to make the questions-and-answers exercise light and informal so as not to impose undue pressure on participants. I have tried several times to eliminate this exercise when class-time was running short and participants were tiring; however, I like to keep it in, if possible, because its value is undeniable. The value of questions to prove one’s retention has been recognized for some time. It seems worthy of use until it is proven otherwise or some other method is discovered to replace it.

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<sup>10</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 49



The application exercise comes from the Personal Transformation Program, whose primary developer was Daniel Jordan. He was a Rhodes Scholar and Director of the Anisa Project, an educational program for children, and a member of the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly from 1963 until his death in 1982. In light of Bahá'u'lláh's words: "*It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.*"<sup>11</sup> two important things take place during the application exercise. One, the participants are asked to brainstorm or imagine ways they could put into action what they have learned from the study. Asking the group to state as many possibilities for action as they can, helps open up numerous prospects that wouldn't normally be considered by individual participants without input from the group's creative exploration. I was impressed when I first experienced this in the Personal Transformation Program. Once one person suggests an action, it triggers the imagination of others that just blossoms into a plethora of possibilities.

The second important thing is the commitment to action. Research shows that when students are asked to write out an action plan based on newly learned behavioral possibilities, the potential for them to implement the new information is significantly enhanced. Something about imagining new behavior in one's mind, formulating it into a statement, and then writing it down connects the tactile senses with the mind, further increasing the probability for behavioral change. And isn't transformation the whole point of the study?

I have been in groups where possibilities for action were collectively imagined, individual plans or goals were set, and then shared with the group. There can be undesirable effects, however, prompted by the sharing of individual goals and plans. Some educators might think the peer pressure of sharing goals helps the student further engage in their plans and goals. Even if this is the case, some serious compromises are made that are sometimes harmful to individuals and the collective unity of the group. Asking people to make goals and action plans that will be publicly shared changes the purpose of the experience in the mind of the participants. Some become competitive, which can provoke a rivalry to make the most impressive goal, which is often unrealistic. Others who try to make attainable goals often feel challenged, intimidated, or not good enough when asked to share. These outcomes are inconsistent with the Bahá'í principles of unity,

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<sup>11</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Fountain of Wisdom*, p. 153 ¶11.9

kindness to others, all-inclusiveness, and the spirit of equality we strived to incorporate into the study process. The participant realizes from the brainstorming that they can draw on others' ideas and then, free from peer influence, formulate an action plan of their own that allows them to implement the spirit of the experience as their God-given talents allow.

In our early pilot studies for Bahá'í Essentials, we did not ask the participants to share their plans or goals. Others in the behavioral training field suggested that we do so. We tried it and identified the undesirable outcomes noted. After discontinuing the verbalization of goals, we found the participants more at ease and fellowship warmly enriched.

The closing reading exercise is included because it just feels right. Bahá'í meetings usually begin and end by calling on the presence of the divine through prayer, which makes the experience sacred. Ending the study with a story, prayer, or reading makes it feel complete. For these reasons, we have kept the closing reading in the study process.

## **AFTERWORD**

The older educational experiences I was exposed to in my schooling during the mid-twentieth century were designed during the Industrial Age and took on many of the aspects of that time. Students were taught specific curricula that were generally conveyed in an authoritarian manner. Students were expected to fit into the model. Little to no attention was given to modifying the educational model to serve students' diverse needs. That began to change in the latter half of the twentieth century. I was fortunate enough to experience it. Bahá'í Essentials reflects many of those changes. We wanted a study process that functioned to educate and deepen new believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith that was kind, loving, all-inclusive, and unifying. We wanted to help people learn by giving them a guided experience that would allow them to self-discover the truths of the Bahá'í revelation. We wanted to create studies that were complete, yet with sessions limited to two hours. We wanted the process to be consistent with how people naturally and normally learn while employing all the best science available in adult education. We wanted it to be easy to facilitate. We wanted it to be useable by individuals or small groups. We wanted it to be accurate with pilot study testing and revisions as needed. We wanted it to engender clarity for

the participants and eliminate as much confusion as possible. We wanted it to activate that “mystical feeling” which the Guardian stated was “the core of religious faith”<sup>12</sup> We wanted it to glorify the Cause of God in the hearts of its participants. To me, by God’s grace, I feel that mission was accomplished.

As you can see from its history, Bahá’í Essentials was not originally intended to meet all the needs of the institutes as identified by the Universal House of Justice. My goal was simply to “devise methods for educating large numbers of believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith” (The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 153, 1996). Throughout the late 1990s, the Universal House of Justice continued to address principles surrounding the criteria for materials being developed for the institutes. I tried, during that time, to restructure Bahá’í Essentials to meet those needs. I added guidance to our facilitator’s manual to consider certain studies in a given order to meet the criteria for a “sequence of courses.” We changed the designation of “facilitators” to “tutors” because that was the language being used by the Universal House of Justice. We tried to incorporate a training component, which was the verbalization of actions plans and goals in the application exercise. The second edition of Bahá’í Essentials, published in 2006, reflected these added features.

After it became clear that the Ruhi Program was being universally adopted, we had to review the purpose and best use intent of Bahá’í Essentials. In the beginning it was, and is again, a collection of independent studies specifically designed for deepening new believers and youth in the fundamental verities of the Faith. We have changed our studies and facilitator’s guide to reflect its original intent and removed language pertaining to institutes, sequences of courses, tutors, and trainings. Because such language was strewn throughout the second edition of Bahá’í Essentials, we discontinued its publication in hard copy and, with required review, published a revised, digital edition of each study as a free download at [bahaessentials.com](http://bahaessentials.com). We no longer recommend studying them in any sequence except to say that understanding the stations of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and their twin Covenants is fundamental to all the other studies.

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<sup>12</sup> From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, cited in *Lights of Guidance, A Bahá’í Reference File*, p. 506

I would like to say a few words about behavioral versus cognitive education. Behavioral education primarily seeks to instill identifiable behaviors in students and puts less emphasis on helping them comprehend the why and wherefore of the skills they are learning. Cognitive education relies upon the student's better understanding of himself, his purpose, and his relationship to others in the world that inspires efforts to change. For the sake of unity, I think for now it's best to consider them equally important in the world, but they have different purposes. For our intention and purpose to study and learn the fundamental verities of the Faith, I think an emphasis on the cognitive approaches to education is preferable. It is because this is about faith. We are told by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds."<sup>13</sup> The Bahá'í writings are replete with emphasis on the importance of understanding. I have seen believers come and go in our Faith and others. The more profound their heartfelt understanding of their true purpose in their relationship with God, the firmer they remained in faith, which was critical to the life of their eternal soul and subsequently beneficial to the Bahá'í community and society at large. I have seen people come into the Bahá'í Faith believing in some or all of the social principles but, when challenged or tested in some way, their understanding of the fundamental verities may not have been sufficient enough to sustain their faith, and they eventually drifted or turned away. My assessment leads me to believe that behavioral changes without conscious knowledge and faith are insufficient and do not meet the objectives of a good study of the fundamental verities.

Training people to acquire specific skills is different. Helping someone learn *how to* do something requires a well-designed program of cognitive learning accompanied by hands-on skill-building exercises and experiences. Incorporating a behavioral approach to learning is imperative for these purposes.

The studies in Bahá'í Essentials are designed to consolidate one's faith in Bahá'u'lláh and to help sustain one's spiritual journey in both this world and the next. There are some subjects of study that lend themselves to follow-up trainings, such as the study on *Teaching the Faith*, which could easily be followed with training on how to teach the Faith to others. After studying the deepening on *The Nineteen Day Feast*, a training could be provided on how to host a Feast. The study on

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<sup>13</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 383

*Holy Days in the Bahá'í Era* could be followed up with an opportunity to be trained on how to host a holy day event, and so on. There are no trainings, however, to be considered that would accompany or follow a study on *The Station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. This topic lends itself to a study that helps develop a heartfelt understanding that will inspire change in how one reveres 'Abdu'l-Bahá, how one refers to his guidance with faith in the truth of his interpretation, and how one seeks to emulate his perfect example of Bahá'í life. Just teaching one to behave with goodness and kindness like 'Abdu'l-Bahá, without a deeper understanding, has evident limitations. The studies in Bahá'í Essentials were designed to deepen believers' understanding of the Faith. If a particular study lent itself to a "how-to" training, it was our original intent to make that available as well. However, the trainings to supplement the Bahá'í Essentials studies have not yet been completed.

I have sought honest feedback from both facilitators and participants of Bahá'í Essentials. Their reviews have been extremely positive. If concerns about a study were expressed, serious consultation ensued with a clear intention to understand their suggestions or concerns. These were always revisited in consultation with Sue and others, and if applicable after thorough pilot studies, changes were made to the study. This was always done with the caveat that any changes must *improve* the study in attaining its primary objective(s). I think one of the reasons Bahá'í Essentials is such good deepening material is because there were so many people who made meaningful contributions.

One of the delightful outcomes in the development of Bahá'í Essentials is how easy the studies are to facilitate. Facilitators have affirmed that just about anyone could pick up a study and facilitate it with ease without any foreknowledge of the process or the information being studied. I have seen it more difficult for some who are experienced in providing deepenings or trainings because they are used to doing it a certain way and are not accustomed to following the facilitator's notes and letting the study process do most of the work for them. The process as it is now, with facilitators notes accompanying each exercise in every study, flows almost effortlessly. Facilitators like it considerably.

Participants who have taken part in the Bahá'í Essentials studies seem to be very pleased. Like everything else in life, you get out of it what you put into it. I am sure if we stood on our head in a corner and read the sacred writings with sincere intent, we would learn something because the

writings themselves are what is transformative. However, providing a comfortable, logical, heartfelt, meaningful, unifying, guided experience of study can only be a better thing. Most participants have said this is what they experienced.

Another outstanding feature of Bahá'í Essentials is the provision of definitions, synonyms, and replacement phrases with each quotation. Their value is becoming more evident as the English language continues to change and people become unfamiliar with many of the words used in the Bahá'í writings. It also has a secondary effect in that those who learn English as a second language are further tutored by having the definitions, synonyms, and replacement phrases available to aid in their understanding of the English language.

When new believers come into the Faith, they can't help but wonder if there is a book or something that details what the teachings are, what the basic beliefs are, or what the "rules" are. They want to know what is expected of them, and when or how they are to worship or be of service. They want to know how to conduct their family lives, along with numerous other inquiries. Bahá'í Essentials is intended to address these major concerns that are common to believers early in their Bahá'í journey.

I think Bahá'í Essentials is an excellent study for youth (age 15 and older) as well. Even those who grow up in Bahá'í households and accept the teachings find Bahá'í Essentials an excellent means to consolidate their faith and set them out with firmness on the spiritual path.

Others have told me repeatedly that they believe every Bahá'í can benefit considerably from these studies whether new believer or veteran, youth or elder. The importance and value of a thorough understanding of the fundamental verities of the Faith are beyond measure. Just the one study on *The Station of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation* can be enough to propel individuals on their spiritual journey throughout their lifetime because it is so profound, inspiring, and transformative. Another study, *The Station of the Báb*, explores the unique characteristics of the Báb as an independent Manifestation of God, as the herald and forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, and as an inaugurator of a new universal cycle. This knowledge is fundamental to Bahá'í belief as the Báb has no parallel in religious history. How can a believer appreciate the prayers of the Báb, his writings, or the holy day events related to him without understanding his station? The study on *The Station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* delves into the Master's role as divine interpreter and perfect

exemplar of the Faith. His unique station is also unprecedented, and a thorough comprehension of that station provides the believer with assurance about his blessed guidance and his infallible interpretation of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. The study on *The Twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá* explain how this unique divine guidance is extended into the roles of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice. What could be more important to a believer than understanding these verities? Bahá'í Essentials gives the believers a place to turn for understanding and comfort in their Faith, eliminating so much of the confusion, difference, and burden experienced by believers in former dispensations. Study of *The Bahá'í Administrative Order* reveals its intended uniqueness to provide both the nucleus and pattern for that God-inspired new world order destined to evolve in time into the promised Kingdom of God on earth. Studies on the sanctity and nature of *Bahá'í Elections* and *Bahá'í Leadership Style* unveil the spiritual aspects to the development of Bahá'u'lláh's unique world administrative system. The study on *Relationships with Political and Religious Systems* further consolidates the believer's role in society and strengthens the Bahá'í community in its unity. *The Relationship of the Faith to Preceding Religions* ties the believer to all his spiritual brothers and sisters of other faiths and harmonizes those relationships through unity and fellowship. *Establishing the Unity of Mankind* reminds us that unity—that heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony in human relations—is the “alpha and omega of all Bahá'í objectives.”<sup>14</sup> The importance and responsibility of *Teaching the Faith* to others is a requirement for spiritual progress and divine assistance! It assists our personal spiritual growth and simultaneously shares the divine gift of faith with others. The significance of the spiritual disciplines cannot be overemphasized: *The Importance of Prayer*, specifically the daily obligatory prayers, the *Recitation of the Greatest Name* nine-five times a day, the *Daily Readings* of the verses of God, the monthly collective worship and fellowship of *The Nineteen Day Feast*, the yearly discipline of *The Bahá'í Fast*, and observance of the *Holy Days in the Bahá'í Era* all contribute substantially to ensure one's steady spiritual development. How vital these are to the spiritual progress of the soul! The spiritual nature and reality of our relationships with money and material possessions are clarified and sanctified in the studies on *The Bahá'í Fund* and *The Right of God*. *Bahá'í Standards of Behavior*, *Alcohol and Drugs*, *Bahá'í Marriage Laws*, *Bahá'í Divorce Laws*, and *The Harm of Backbiting*, outline, clarify, and expand on people's true spiritual nature and the

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<sup>14</sup> *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.29

importance of the “divine rules” that serve as guideposts along the spiritual path and help keep us safe from harm. The true aspects of our present and eternal reality are addressed in the study on *The Purpose and Reality of Man*. *Distinguishing Truth* helps believers learn how to discern what is right, good, true, and real. It helps them employ reason and science and forego superstitions and decision-making processes that may be faulty and pervert their experience in this world. The importance and value of studying *Service to the Cause*, *The Spiritual Nature of Work*, *Bahá’í Family Life*, *The Will and Burial*, *Service to Humanity*, and the education and training of *Children and Youth* are all central to a spiritual society. The importance of our relationship to our brother and sister believers who preceded us is found in *Bahá’í History*, a study that is fundamental to developing an understanding and appreciation of the glory and greatness of the Faith and of the heroes and heroines who played their parts in what the Guardian referred to as “what the world will come to recognize as the greatest drama in the world’s spiritual history.” These are the studies that comprise Bahá’í Essentials. They convey the basic fundamental verities of the Cause necessary for a fulfilling Bahá’í life.

The first edition of Bahá’í Essentials was published in the year 2000, and it consisted of 29 studies. Copies of the book were sent to Bahá’í distribution services around the world. The second edition was published in 2006 with numerous revisions and one additional study. Currently, there are 33 studies now online with no additional studies envisioned.

In 2011, I felt inspired to send a letter to the Universal House of Justice offering Bahá’í Essentials as a component to the training institutes. I had observed that some people who had attended the Ruhi Program had discontinued their attendance at some point for various reasons. I thought perhaps Bahá’í Essentials could be offered as a supplement or alternative opportunity to study the fundamental verities of the Cause. I received a reply that the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States would be contacting me on this matter.

There was concern that Bahá’í Essentials was offering an alternative sequence of courses that could be viewed as a diversion from the Ruhi Courses, which would be inconsistent with the current Plan. Some revisions were recommended.

After consultation with the NSA, we agreed that the second edition of Bahá’í Essentials should be discontinued because it was published as a sequence of courses that encouraged the use of institute



tutors and was promoted as a training course. I subsequently withdrew the book titled Bahá'í Essentials from all distributors. In consultation with the NSA, the studies that comprised Bahá'í Essentials were then revised to reflect their original intent as independent studies rather than a sequence of courses. The language was also modified to refer to the teachers as facilitators, not tutors, and the proposed relationship to training institutes was abandoned. These agreed-upon revisions now reflect what is currently available as independent studies on the website [bahaessentials.com](http://bahaessentials.com).

## **POSTSCRIPT**

After our experiences in the 1970s with the teaching teams, I found it hard to get the need for a good deepening program for new believers out of my mind. I sincerely wanted to help these new believers. I had recognized Bahá'u'lláh and was spiritually set on fire. Why weren't they? I remembered how we had been nurtured by so many believers through visits, firesides, deepenings, Feasts, Holy Day events, conferences, and summer and winter schools. *How to assist new believers on their spiritual journey?* became my quest.

I think my mind behaves like a bloodhound. Once it gets the scent of something and sets out on finding it, it's difficult to hold back. At least that's the way it feels, and that's the way it was with Bahá'í Essentials. Because of this trait, I may have been the driving force in this endeavor, but many others lent their expertise as well. One whose contribution cannot go unacknowledged is my wife, Sue. She is truly a unique person, as anyone who knows her will testify. First of all, I have to say that she has a sixth sense I was not blessed with. She has the ability to know what others are feeling and experiencing. When she meets someone, she is able to perceive their needs in a very short time. And she does this with everyone, wherever she is. When people come to our home with children, she can put the children at ease, meet their needs, help them feel comfortable, and find something fun for them to do even if she has to abandon the adults to play with them. She attends to whomsoever has the greatest needs, and when no one is around she tends to our house plants, the numerous trees, bushes, and plants in the yard and garden, and all the creatures that live on our property or visit there. She even arranges stones in our yard in such a way that glorifies the stones. Who does that? She does the same to everyone and everything without complaining because it

gives her joy. Some have called her an “empath”, and maybe that’s so. I have never met anyone else like her. I sometimes imagine she is half-fairy and half-human the way she dances around pixie-like, bestowing goodness on everything and everyone in her presence.

Sue’s unique characteristics made the greatest contribution to the loving, uniting, all-inclusive learning process that comprises Bahá’í Essentials. Every time we would do a pilot study for a different teaching or training exercise, we would debrief afterward. I would ask her how she thought it went. I knew better than to expect an answer right away as it takes a while for her to process an experience. I have learned that all I have to do is ask her a question, note that she understands me by the glance of her eyes, and then wait. I may have to wait a few days, but eventually, a response will come.

I remember once we were facilitating a workshop on unity in Alaska. There were nearly 20 attendees. I asked her afterward what she thought about the exercises we were experimenting with. She asked me, “Did you notice when we gathered after lunch one of the women who in the morning sat near the front moved and sat with her back against the back wall?” I had seen it but had no concern about it. Sue continued, “She did that for a reason. In the morning when we had the sharing round and everyone gave their understanding on a specific topic, hers was discounted by a veteran male believer. It hurt her, and she didn’t engage after that.”

“We can’t do anything about her sensitivity,” I replied.

“I’m just telling you what I observed,” she reminded me.

I stewed on that for quite some time. Does it matter if some are super-sensitive or that others are overbearing? How are we to eliminate that? She didn’t know either, but it was our job to figure it out. So, we set about together to revise the exercise in such a way that would address these concerns. Once we thought we had it solved, we did a pilot study again to test the exercise. We repeated the process until we were able to create one that worked. We have done this over and over again throughout our half-century of life together.

I feel blessed and fortunate to have had these experiences. I hope telling this story will help others who endeavor to create Bahá’í study materials in the future. I also hope when considerations are

given to changing any of the Bahá'í Essentials studies those involved will give serious attention to understanding how the studies were developed and why the study process remains the way it is.

Peace-n-Love,

Steven E. Ellis